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The Choice of Heracles

An Address

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By

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THE CHOICE OF HERACLES.

"To the entent that I wyll declare howe gouernours of realmęs and cities may be prepared, I will use the policie of a wyse and counnynge gardener: who purposynge to haue in his gardeine a fyne and preciouse herbe, that shulde be to hym and all others repairynge thereto, excellently comodiouse or pleasant, he will first serche throughout his gardeyne where he can finde the most melowe and fertile erth; and therein wil he put the sede of the herbe to growe and be norisshed."—*Sir Thomas Elyot.*

It is our pride to term the South conservative, not, as some Philistines connote the word, with an intendment of what is behind the times, but with a congratulatory appreciation that here are a people alive to all the real progress of the age in which we live, but still clinging with respect to that concept which spells patriotism—the subordination of the individual to the community under equal laws. Here, as in few parts of our broad United States, men still regard that as good which their fathers did because their fathers did it. We live at the end of an old era as well as at the beginning of a new. We can still look back with perspective while our eyes are beginning to reflect the light of vision of the future. With this great privilege of immediate contact with a background of which we can well be proud, surrounded by the stately relics of a race which moved slowly perhaps, but was guided more by principle than by sentiment and emotion—a race which none dares contemn, but all gentlemen are bred to honor—it is fitting that the South should equip her sons for the contests of the new life with whatever is best in the tradition of the past; that we should pass on the torch our forefathers passed to us, if it still illuminates, as I shall today try to maintain that it does.

Our modern creed tells us that those who laid the foundation of our nation demanded too large a sacrifice of the inherent rights of the individual to the general good of the commonweal; that for all the fine French philosophy of the Declaration of Independence, the government which resulted from it was rather a government of Man than of men and women; in fine, that it gave opportunity for the very things it sought to overthrow—the growth of classes and special privilege. In our reaction it may be questioned whether we are not going too far in our concern for the Individual, and whether a modicum of that kind of education which formed the principles of the Fathers might not teach us that,

after all, the rights of the Individual conservatively might ever be subjected to such limitation as sentimentality can not be expected to appreciate, but which wisdom, founded on a knowledge of human history, and indeed of Nature herself, can safely impose. One is reminded of a philosophical observation by Darwin:

> "Perfect equality among the individuals composing the Fuegian tribes must for a long time retard their civilization. As we see those animals whose instinct compels them to live in society, and obey a chief, are most capable of improvement, so it is with the races of mankind. Whether we look at it as a cause or a consequence, the most civilized always have the most artificial governments."

There have been three previous periods in the history of the world when men, in reaction against the tyranny of classes or of states, were actuated by that high passion of idealism for the individual which breathed through the last inaugural address which has come to us from the Capitol in Washington. The literature of Greece reveals a moment when men were freeing themselves from the grip of the state and seeking an unrestrained expression of individual rights, with the privilege to discover and to explore themselves. It is no longer the age of Æschylus, finding its catharsis in the poet's rehearsal of the fortunes and feelings of kings and prophets and princely heroines—it is the age of Euripides the disintegrator, who searched the heart of personal experience and gave a poignant expression to what he discovered. He in turn yielded the stage to Menander and the unheroic emotions of Everyman in the New Comedy, just as Browning has given way to Bernard Shaw.

Again, at the end of the splendid history of the Roman Republic, man sought once more to live for himself and no longer for the state. Literature ceases to be epic in the old Greek sense; it has become personal, esoteric. Catullus plays upon our own private experience as freshly as the Lydian waters still laugh on Sirmio, today as when, returning from Oriental wanderings, he came once more to his beloved Lago di Garda. But chiefly do we find the new note in Virgil—no longer the stern, compelling eloquence of Ennius, but a sweet sentimentalism which a school-girl can understand.

Once more, at the close of another age—that of feudal Europe—do we find men considering intensely the rights, and even more the wrongs, of the individual. We are taught to look upon the defense of

Calas by Voltaire as psychologically the highest moment of a great career of illumination.

It is perhaps unnecessary to suggest that each of these periods of divagation of the interests of the citizen from those of the state was followed by a subjugation of the dearest of all individual rights—that of political liberty; that Philip and his son put out forever the lamp of Greek liberty; that Augustus destroyed the fabric which more than anything material represented "the grandeur that was Rome"; that Napoleon crushed during a cruel hour a nascent national independence. It is equally unnecessary to deduce from what has been said that individuals find their freest expression only under personal tyranny, which, depriving them of concern in the welfare of all, diverts them to a private fingering and fondling of their own souls. It is enough to realize that we are living today in another such age of dissent from the standards of the past; that our literary prophets drive home disillusion in order to make us modern—Ibsen, behind the leering mask of comedy, with the same clairvoyance as moved Erasmus or Lucretius.

Our search is, then, for a gospel which each of us may interpret as authority for the freest choice of moral standards; and we hurry through all beliefs, dissecting as we go those which have been held in the most sacred esteem. We seek natural explanations of those dear prejudices which have moved men to wonder and secret sympathy through countless ages, and what was religion has for some become merely *mores,* taboos, sun myths—an interesting subject for research, but no longer a restraint of conduct.

And so our modern system of education, discontent with the studies which have moved men to high and noble endeavor, prescribes in place of them a pabulum of applied science—the most reasonable, as it is the most dreary, of the utilities of the modern world. We hear accepted leaders of opinion insist that we shall no longer waste our time with building of character; that the true end of education is to sharpen our wits for the conflict of life, to arm ourselves with weapons of immediate use.

All the cry of the schools is of vocational education. The lad who has learned to read is to begin, forsooth, at once to prepare himself for a trade or even a profession. To study the classics, to drink inspiration at the fountains of the past, is no more profitable, we are told, than the efforts of Tantalus to slake his thirst. I do not mean to suggest that vocational education is without its uses—far from it: but that among

such men and women as I am addressing today it might well be confined to the individual whose bent of mind discovers a probable career as a technician. Even if a man is eventually to specialize, he is a sounder man if he does so on a solid foundation of tradition. Vocational education as a system for all is what I deplore. It is a sage counsel only for the industrially inept, for wage-earning mechanics at the highest, but most necessary shall we say for the negro—not for potential leaders of men. The trail of it is, however, everywhere evident, even in our higher schools and colleges, with the result that we are breeding a race of average men whose education operates like a labor union to deprive the best of the opportunity of his natural equipment, and to reduce efficiency to a level attainable by the incompetent. This is responsible for the most-to-be-regretted type in our industrial life today—the man in authority who is merely an official, competent to enforce rules, diligent, earnest, faithful it may be, but incapable of imagining new things.

With all deference to current opinion to the contrary, I believe with old Sir Thomas Elyot that proper education for holding places of authority is as vital to the welfare of the state as the education of the many. As we are now facing new and fundamental questions of politics, of social science and economics, there was perhaps never a time when, as a nation, we more required leaders of poise and self-restraint, capable of bringing to the solution of the new the experience of the old, not that they may solve these questions only as they have been solved in the past, not that they may resist the pressure of the new, but that they may be able to choose what is sound and avoid what is merely specious.

I yield to none in admiration of the man who knows—the man equipped with modern science; but I venture, nevertheless, to assert that without background, as he too often is, he may be a narrow man, and in very truth plays, after all, but a small part in the world. He can not move men to action—he can only facilitate their poor material and human convenience, which breeds more wants than it satisfies; he can not stir the heart to singing—he can only reckon its pulsations.

My appeal is, then, to a view of life which will take account of the past as well as of the future, in education as in the conduct of affairs for which education is the preparation. The object is often made to that kind of equipment which is founded largely upon study of the humanities, that such a man enters life a mere amateur. He knows nothing useful, and so, it is said, he is unfit for industry, which in our age and in our civilization is the chief end of life, and so of education;

that, for example, in international commercial competition he is putty in the hands of a technically trained German. I venture, however, to maintain the thesis that a man with a literary education is as well equipped to lead the industrial world as is a vocationally educated physicist or mechanical engineer of similar natural parts and character. It is a familiar experience in industry, as it is practised today, to see the man who has little or no special training in science—indeed, alas! sometimes little education of any kind outside of the school of experience—leading successfully some great industry, solving its problems with full use of all the mysteries of applied science, and reaping the rewards of power and honor which come with successful leadership. How he does this is not far to seek. He *hires* the specialist as he requires him, and that too, unfortunately for current educational theory, usually at a comparatively small wage. He does not himself need to know what others can tell; he can use technical men as he uses a table of logarithms. But, for leadership in its largest aspect, he does need a personal and ever available equipment of high principle, courage, both moral and physical, and imagination—qualities which are native in some characters, but may be cultivated in most through touch and contact with the thoughts and minds of the great souls who have by those qualities achieved great deeds in the past—that immortal company the tradition of whose acts or words constitutes the body of literature which we term the classics.

I urge, then, upon those who would lead in industry, as in other conflicts of life, to build character and imagination by the study of the humanities. It is, however, no easy school that I counsel, no promenade or *pasear* through the contemporary literature of predigested knowledge—the books about books—which crowd our libraries, the ancient history drugged with modern politics, not Grote and Mommsen, but Thucydides and Tacitus. I summon him who would know and understand

"the springs
Of wonder, and the wisdom of the world,"

back to the sources, to the originals in all ages, that by the very labor of the search the knowledge may be more securely gained and taste the sweeter in achievement. He has weary days and straining nights before him, but he has deathless privilege, the communion with great souls. Scholarship in its technical sense is not now my subject. It is not the life of an Oxford don, nor of a German privatdocent, that I

hold up to the emulation of a young American who would become a captain of industry. The life of a Scaliger, a Casaubon, a Bentley would be an anachronism in our teeming world of industry. But from such as these there is much more than scholarship to learn. Because their tools are those I recommend to him who would know how to lead men, and because their methods are those of the painful endeavor which alone yields enduring success in any form of human enterprise, their lives may be our inspiration as we read the books which their labors have made readable. Here, for example, is Joseph Scaliger pleasantly pictured for us by his great contemporary Casaubon, ever debonair in the use of his hard-won learning:

> "A man who, by the indefatigable devotion of a stupendous genius to the acquisition of knowledge, had garnered up vast stores of uncommon lore. And his memory had such a happy readiness that, whenever the occasion called for it, whether it were in conversation or whether he were consulted by letter, he was ready to bestow with lavish hand what had been gathered by him in the sweat of his brow."

So it is that true classical study can never be dilettantism. "Not without dust and heat" may one obtain a literary education which may serve in the practical life to come. I will take the liberty of illustrating my point by a version from one of the books I recommend. It is the old, old parable of the joy which comes in work, as Prodicus the Sophist wrote and polished and read it to numberless audiences of young Greeks in the great fifth century, and was commended therefor by Socrates. Its moral is today no less pertinent than is its charm of expression, though the full measure of that charm must, indeed, be sought in the Greek original. It is the parable of *The Choice of Heracles.*

> "When Heracles was emerging from boyhood into the bloom of youth, having reached that season in which the young man, now standing upon the verge of independence, shows plainly whether he will enter upon the path of virtue or of vice, he went forth into a quiet place and sat debating with himself which of these two paths he should pursue; and as he there sat musing, there appeared to him two women of great stature which drew nigh to him. The one was fair to look upon, frank and free by gift of nature, her limbs adorned with purity and her eyes with bashfulness; sobriety set the rhythm of her gait, and she was clad in white apparel. The

other was of a different type: the fleshy softness of her limbs betrayed her nurture, while the complexion of her skin was embellished that she might appear whiter and rosier than she really was, and her figure that she might seem taller than nature had made her; she stared with wide-open eyes, and the raiment wherewith she was clad served but to reveal the ripeness of her bloom. With frequent glances she surveyed her person, or looked to see if others noticed her; while ever and anon she fixed her gaze upon the shadow of herself intently.

"Now when these two had drawn near to Heracles, she who was first named advanced at an even pace towards him, but the other, in her eagerness to outstrip her, ran forward to the youth, exclaiming, 'I see you, Heracles, in doubt and difficulty what path of life to choose; make me your friend and I will lead you to the pleasantest road and the easiest. This I promise you: you shall taste all of life's sweets and escape all bitters. In the first place, you shall not trouble your brain with war or business; other topics shall engage your mind: your only speculation, what meat or drink you shall find agreeable to your palate; what delight of ear or eye; what pleasure of smell or touch; how you shall pillow your limbs in softest slumber; how cull each individual pleasure without alloy of pain; and if ever the suspicion steal upon you that the stream of joys will one day dwindle, trust me, I will not lead you where you shall replenish the store by toil of body and trouble of soul. No! others shall labor, but you shall reap the fruit of their labors; you shall withhold your hand from nought which shall bring you gain. For to all my followers I give authority and power to help themselves freely from every side.'

"Heracles, hearing these words, made answer: 'What, O lady, is the name you bear?' To which she: 'Know that my friends call me Happiness, but they that hate me have their own nicknames for me—Vice and Naughtiness.'

"But just then the other of those fair women approached and spoke: 'Heracles, I too am come to you, seeing that your parents are well known to me, and in your nurture I have gauged your nature; wherefore I entertain good hope that if you choose the path which leads to me, you shall greatly bestir yourself to be the doer of many a doughty deed of noble emprise; and that I too shall be held in even higher honor for your sake, lit with the lustre shed by valorous deeds. I will not cheat you with preludings of pleasure, but I will relate to you the things that are according to the ordinances of God in very truth. Know then that among things that are lovely and of good report, not one have the gods bestowed upon mortal man apart from toil and pains. Would you obtain the favor of the gods, then must you pay these same gods service; would you be loved by your friends, you must benefit these friends; do you

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desire to be honored by the state, you must give the state your aid; do you claim admiration for your virtue from all Hellas, you must strive to do some good to Hellas; do you wish earth to yield her fruits to you abundantly, to earth you must pay your court; do you seek to amass riches from your flocks and herds, on them must you bestow your labor; or is it your ambition to be potent as a warrior, able to save your friends and subdue your foes, then must you learn the arts of war from those who have the knowledge, and practise their application in the field when learned; or would you e'en be powerful of limb and body, then must you habituate limbs and body to obey the mind, and exercise yourself with toil and sweat. . . . Toils like these, O Heracles, son of noble parents, it is yours to meet with, and, having endured, to enter into the heritage assured you of transcendent happiness.'"

These are immanent lessons of success in a selfish world, but the fierce joy which comes of consciousness of work well done is not the only reward of him who builds his character upon the humanities. He who equips himself for life with an education of science, but with "small Latin and less Greek," what is his intellectual resource in his hours of ease and divertisement? If he is a banker, like Sir John Lubbock, he can doubtless amuse his leisure with ants and bees; but if he is an entomologist for his livelihood, he can not reasonably expect diversion in banking as an avocation: it is probable that the Comptroller of the Currency might intervene with an awful veto. But he who has founded his career upon a study of the great dead whom we term the classics, has not only a fund of experience and tradition of achievement to guide and stimulate his workaday life, but, when work is done, he has a sweet well of imagination to dip into, vastly to be preferred to the muck of a modern literature of unrest and sordid discontent. He may betake himself to that wonderful isle of the poet's conjuring, there to invite his soul and refresh his faculties. He, too, can live in Arcady.

"And I have fitted up some chambers there
Looking towards the golden Eastern air
And level with the living winds, which flow
Like waves above the living waves below.
I have sent books and music there, and all
Those instruments with which high Spirits call
The future from its cradle, and the past
Out of its grave, and make the present last
In thoughts and joys which sleep, but can not die,
Folded within their own eternity."

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